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Fred Dallmayr

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Self and Other: Gadamer and the Hermeneutics of Difference

Fred Dallmayr

Philosophy's relation to the world of lived experience (the life-world) is complex and controverted. In traditional vocabulary, the issue is whether philosophy's habitat resides inside or outside the Platonic cave. The issue has not come to rest in our time. While "analytic" philosophers prefer to externalize or distance their targets of analysis, Continental thinkers (at least since Heidegger) refuse the comforts of this spectatorial stance. Like sensitive seismographs, European thinkers register the subterranean tremors which in our time affect the (once solid) underpinnings of Western culture: the pillars of subjectivity, of the *cogito*, and of rationality seen as a means of mastery over nature. What emerges from these seismographic soundings is an experience of dislocation or ontological decentering, blurring the boundaries between subject and object, between self and other, and between humans and nature (the former *res extensa*). As it happens, this experiential tremor is accompanied in our time by a broader geopolitical dislocation: the displacement of Europe from center stage and her insertion into a global welter of competing cultures and countercultures. To be sure, Europe (and the West in general) still forcefully asserts its hegemony; but the self-assurance of this hegemonic position has been irremediably lost or at least placed in jeopardy. The present pages seek to explore this double move of dislocation by attending to one particularly prominent and reliable seismograph: the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Born in 1900, Gadamer has been an astute participant and reflective witness (not just a spectator) throughout the entire course of our troubled century.

The adopted focus of these pages can readily be further justified. Since his early writings on dialogical politics—that is, a politics not dominated by a totalizing ideology—Gadamer's reflections have continuously concentrated on the porous relations between self and other, between reader and text, and between speaker and language; to this extent, his work has served as a beacon for several generations of students now, illuminating the dimly lit landscape of refracted identities and of a selfhood infected with otherness. At the same time, his work resonates deeply with larger

global concerns. As the foremost contemporary representative of European humanism, Gadamer has persistently reflected and commented on the significance of European culture, alerting us both to its intrinsic grandeur and to its tragedy or possible limitations. Thus, I want to argue, Gadamerian hermeneutics is not just a parochial ingredient of Continental thought, but an important building stone in the emerging global city and in a dialogically construed cultural ecumenicism.¹

In this essay I shall proceed from the issue of self-other relations to broader cultural concerns and especially to the topic of cross-cultural dialogue. The opening section takes as its guide a short book titled *Wer bin Ich und wer bist Du?* [*Who am I and Who are You?*], which contains Gadamer's comments on the poetry of Paul Celan and, in this connection, probes the interpenetration of self and other and of identity and difference. The discussion of Celan is supported and fleshed out in the first section by references to some of Gadamer's responses to Derrida, having to do chiefly with the role of dialogue and the "good will" in dialogue. The second section shifts attention to the larger cultural arena, taking as its reference point one of Gadamer's more (unjustly) neglected writings, *The Legacy of Europe* [*Das Erbe Europas*]. In a concluding section, I will bring out Gadamer's relevance in the ongoing process of hegemonic Westernization and especially for the alternative project of an interactive dialogue—perhaps an agonistic dialogue—among competing cultures.

I

Gadamer's work has always revolved around the issue of self-other relations. During the waning years of the Weimar Republic and in the face of fascist totalitarianism, the young Gadamer sketched the contours of a dialogically interactive republic—an image heavily indebted to the legacy of Platonic dialogues (though minus any resort to a "guardian class" possessed of ultimate wisdom). Steering clear both of utilitarian interest aggregation and utopian holism, dialogue in this context was the medium of a community constantly in the process of formation, a process in which both the sense of public life and the selfhood or identity of participants are persistently subject to renegotiation.² This view of dialogue was deepened and philosophically corroborated in the postwar years as a result of Gadamer's intensified turn to language and hermeneutical understanding, a turn which at least in part was an outgrowth of

1. Regarding global ecumenicism, compare, for example, Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (New York: Crossroad, 1991); and Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).

2. For a perceptive discussion of Gadamer's early writings on dialogical politics, see Robert R. Sullivan, *Political Hermeneutics: The Early Thinking of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989).

his prolonged encounter with Heidegger. A magisterial apex of his mature thinking, *Truth and Method* (of 1960) presented dialogue as the connecting link between reader and text, between present and past, and between indigenous and alien culture. Still, notwithstanding their rich insights and achievements, Gadamer's writings up to this point continued to be attached to a certain kind of idealism: that is, an outlook where difference was attenuated in favor of a nearly preestablished harmony between self and other and of an eventual "fusion of horizons" between reader and text. A combination of factors and subsequent experiences contributed to a progressive modification of this outlook: foremost among them, the work of the later Heidegger, the impact of French poststructuralism, and exposure to the poetry of Paul Celan. Without in any way trying to rank order these factors or to privilege one over the other, I shall start with the latter experience.

In the decade following *Truth and Method*, Gadamer turned repeatedly to a reading of Celan's poetry, offering lectures and writing papers on the topic. His comments were finally collected in a volume titled *Wer bin Ich und wer bist Du?* (published in 1973). This slender volume offers a probing commentary on Celan's poetic cycle, "Crystal of Breath" [*Atemkristall*]. The accentuated sense of difference and radical otherness is immediately evident in the Preface preceding the commentary. As Gadamer notes, "Paul Celan's poems reach us—and we miss their point [*wir verfehlen sie*]." This failure or rupture of communication is by no means haphazard; after all, it was Celan himself who described his poetry as a "message in the bottle" [*Flaschenpost*—leaving it entirely up to the reader to decode the meaning of the message and to determine even whether the bottle contains any message at all. In his Preface, Gadamer describes himself simply as a recipient of Celan's bottle, and his commentary as "decoding efforts" seeking to decipher "nearly illegible signs." Approaching such bottled or encoded signs, he observes, requires sustained patience, diligence, and attentiveness to the emphatic difference or otherness of the text. Poems locked into a bottle cannot possibly be expected to yield complete transparency or to be amenable to logical resolution. Still, recognition of difference is not equivalent to a counsel of despair. As Gadamer writes, pointing to his own endeavor:

In presenting the outcome of prolonged attentiveness, this reader believes to have detected "sense" in these dark incunables—not always a univocal sense, and surely not always a "complete" (or completely transparent) meaning. In many instances, he has only deciphered some passages and offered vague hunches how the gaps of his understanding (not of the text) could be mended. Whosoever believes to have already "understood" Celan's poems, this person is not my interlocutor and not the addressee of these pages. Such a

person does not know what understanding means in this case.³

The "Crystal of Breath" poems discussed in Gadamer's book belong to a larger poetic cycle called "Turning of Breath" [*Atemwende*]. These allusions to breath and its turning and crystallization offer a clue to the coded message in the bottle: what the reader encounters here is a peculiarly ruptured communication or a communication through non-communication. As Gadamer observes, "In his later poetry, Paul Celan approaches more and more the breathless stillness of silence in the word turned cryptic cipher." To make headway into this kind of poetry, the reader must be ready for a journey into alien terrain—where readiness does not mean a specially erudite preparation but simply a willingness to listen to the "breathless stillness" of the word. In this journey, some clues may be provided by the poet himself—although these must be treated with great caution and circumspection. Poetry is not simply the expression of the poet's private feelings or a disclosure of his inner selfhood (or ego); hence, pondering the sense of a poem cannot simply be replaced by psychic empathy. These caveats are particularly important in the case of the cryptic or "hermetic" poetry of Celan—despite the latter's repeated invocation of personal pronouns (like "I," "thou," "we," and "you"). Notwithstanding this resort to indexicals, Gadamer notes, the actual reference of Celan's pronouns remains in every case "profoundly uncertain." Thus, the term "I" frequently employed in the poems does not simply denote the poet's selfhood seen as something distinct from the "selves" of his readers; rather, the term refers to the self in general, to everybody or "every one of us." Yet, even this formulation is still precarious—because the self of everyone can likewise not be stabilized or pinpointed with certainty, given its embroilment with a "thou" or other. As used by Celan, the term "thou" or "you" means, or can mean, anybody: the reader, a friend or neighbor, or perhaps "that closest and most distant thou which is God." According to Gadamer, the precise target of the address "cannot be determined"; in fact, "the thou is an 'I' just as much and as little as the I is a self (or ego)."⁴

These comments are exemplified in the first poem of Celan's cycle, which starts immediately with pronouns: "You may readily / Welcome me with snow." Subsequent lines of the poem allude to the lushness of summer days and to the restless pace of a life lived "shoulder to shoulder" with the exuberant growth of nature. It is against the backdrop of summer's exuberance that the beginning of the poem welcomes the still-

3. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wer bin Ich und wer bist Du? Ein Kommentar zu Paul Celans Gedichtfolge "Atemkristall"* (Frankfurt-Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 7 (translations into English are my own).

4. *Ibid.*, 9-12. Gadamer diminishes the starkness of the ambiguity somewhat by allowing for an occasional specificity of pronouns. Thus, he speaks of the possible substitution of the "reader-ego" for the "poet's ego" and the resulting "determinacy of the meaning of thou." *Ibid.*, 12.

ness of snow—but it does so with personal pronouns. Who or what is meant by the opening “You” of the poem, Gadamer asks, and responds, “Nothing more specific or determinate than the Other or otherness itself which, after a summer of restless striving, is expected to grant welcome relief.” Likewise, the “I” invoked in these lines is not simply the poet’s selfhood but any being longing for winter and silence—perhaps even for the withdrawn reticence of death. In Gadamer’s words, “What is expressed in these lines is the readiness to accept otherness—whatever it may be.” It is important to note that the appeal to winter and snow involves not merely a reference to a change of seasons or an outward cycle of nature; rather, the appeal is manifest in the poem itself, in its subdued brevity and reticent sparseness. To this extent, the lines instantiate poignantly the turning and crystallization of breath. The stillness of the verses is, Gadamer writes,

the same stillness which prevails at the turning of breath, at the near-inaudible moment of the renewed inhalation of breath. For this is what “*Atemwende*” signifies: the experience of the noiseless, motionless gap between inhaling and exhaling. I would wish to add that Celan connects this turning of breath or this moment of breath reversal not only with a posture of motionless reticence, but also with that subdued kind of hope which is implicit in every reversal or conversion [*Umkehr*].

This element of latent hope, however, does not in any way detract from the stark sobriety and hermetic non-expressiveness of Celan’s poems. This non-expressiveness also undercuts the prospect of semantic transparency based on interspsychic empathy. As Gadamer adds: “The distinction between me and you, between the self of the poet and that of his readers miscarries.” To the question “Who am I and who are you?” Celan’s poetry responds “by leaving the question open.”⁵

Gadamer’s comments on the remainder of Celan’s poems are richly nuanced and completely resist summary synopsis in the present context. At the end of his step-by-step exegesis, Gadamer appends an “Epilogue,” or postscript, which usefully highlights the most salient points of his commentary. A central point concerns the character of poetic exegesis, especially of cryptically encoded texts like Celan’s message in the bottle. According to Gadamer, the interpreter in this case has to proceed in a diligent but cautious manner, avoiding the temptations of both complete appropriation and renunciation. Since Celan’s verses hover precariously between speech and silence, disclosure and concealment, exegesis likewise has to steer a middle course between understanding and non-understanding, by offering a careful account which yet leaves blank spaces intact. For Gadamer, the endeavor of understanding cannot simply be

5. Ibid., 14-18, 39.

abandoned, notwithstanding the poet's reticence. As he notes, it is not sufficient merely to register the failure or rupture of understanding; rather, what is needed is an attempt to look for possible points of entry and then to inquire in which manner and how far understanding may be able to penetrate. The goal of this interpretive endeavor, however, should not be mistaken: the point is not to render transparent what is (and must remain) concealed, but rather to comprehend and respect the complex interlacing of transparency and non-transparency in poetic texts. In the words of the Epilogue:

The objective is *not* to discern or pinpoint the univocity of the poet's intent; not by any means. Nor is it a matter of determining the univocity of the "meaning" expressed in the poem itself. Rather what is involved is attentiveness to the ambiguity, multivocity and indeterminacy unleashed by the poetic text—a multivocity which does not furnish a blank check to the license of the reader, but rather constitutes the very target of the hermeneutical struggle demanded by the text.⁶

In its stress on interpretive perseverance, Gadamer's postscript reflects something like a generic disposition or a "good will" to understanding, that is, a disinclination to let rupture or estrangement have the last word. Instead of celebrating the incommensurability of "language games" or "phrase families" (to borrow terms coined by Wittgenstein and Lyotard), Gadamer's account accentuates the open-endedness and at least partial interpenetration of languages and discourses. In lieu of a radical segregation of texts and readers, his hermeneutics tends to underscore their embeddedness in a common world—although this world is not so much a "universe" as a "pluriverse" or a multifaceted fabric of heterogeneous elements. Above all, the postscript does not grant to poets the refuge of a total exile. Such an exile, in Gadamer's view, would transform the poet's text into the object of an esoteric cult or of academic expertise. For these and other reasons, he considers "sound" the general maxim that poetry should be treated not as a "learned cryptogram for experts" but rather as a text destined for the "members of a language community sharing a common world," a world inhabited by "poets and readers and listeners alike." Operating in such a multifaceted context, "understanding" [*Verstehen*] cannot mean a process of psychic empathy nor a direct grasp of subjective intentionality; given the diversity of outlooks and idioms, exegesis is bound to exhibit the character of struggle, proceeding along the pathway not so much of a preestablished consensus but of something like an "agonistic dialogue." Like every other hermeneutical effort, poetic

6. Ibid., 110. These comments do not prevent Gadamer from observing at another point that the multivocity or "polyvalence" of words is pinpointed or "stabilized in the course of discourse" and that hence there is "a univocity which is necessarily endemic to every type of discourse, even that of *poésie pure*." Ibid., 113.

exegesis has to respect first of all the integrity of the text; that is, it must be attentive to the “said” (as well as the “unsaid”) of poetic discourse. To this extent, it is possible to speak of the pure “textuality” of poems quite independently of the poet’s particular motivations. Yet, textuality forms part of a broader fabric—the “text” of the world—where readers (successfully or unsuccessfully) seek understanding. To the queries of these readers, the poem responds, even in its cryptic reticence. “Like every word in a dialogue,” we read,

the poem too has the character of a response or rejoinder [*Gegenwort*], a rejoinder which intimates also what is not said but what is part of the anticipated sense triggered by the poem—triggered perhaps only in order to be disappointed as expectation. This is true particularly of contemporary lyrical poetry like that of Celan.⁷

Depending on the reader’s questions or expectations, a poem will respond differently, that is, in different registers or on diverse levels of sense and significance. Contemporary poetry requires readers to be in a way multilingual or open to a diversity of idioms and discursive modalities. As Celan himself noted at one point, his poems permit “different possible starting points” of interpretation, thus allowing a movement between levels of meaning (and non-meaning). This allowance, Gadamer is quick to add, should not be equated with randomness or a disjointedness of the text itself. Here again, Celan’s own testimony that his poems do not exhibit chasms or rigid disjunctures is pertinent. Gadamer observes that, although a complex pluriverse, Celan’s poetry displays an inner coherence and integrity, often accomplished through linguistic abbreviation, condensation, and even omission. To this extent, his poems resemble not so much a labyrinth or a magician’s box as a polished crystal (a “breath crystal”) refracting light in multiple ways. In the words of the postscript: “What distinguishes a good poem from a stunning magical trick is the fact that its inner precision becomes all the more evident the more deeply one enters into its structure and its modes of efficacy.” This aspect has been duly recognized by contemporary “structuralist” analysis—although, by clinging solely to semiotic elements, structuralism fails to correlate linguistic coherence with the broader semantic world-context, including the context of readers’ expectations. Only attentiveness to this broader context can give room to the poem’s semantic plurivocity. Poems, in Gadamer’s view, are not simply self-contained art-objects but acquire their proper status only through dialogical

7. Ibid., 112-15. For the notion of “phrase families,” compare Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). Regarding “agonistic (or agonal) dialogue,” see my *Margins of Political Discourse* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 16-19, 109; see also William E. Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 33.

exchange with readers. What a poem is offering or intimating, he writes, every reader “has to supplement from his/her own experience. This is what ‘understanding’ a poem means.”⁸

Supplementation of this kind, the postscript emphasizes, does not denote a lapse into private idiosyncrasy or arbitrary constructions, a lapse which would ignore the otherness of the text and its intrinsic demands. Hermeneutics from this angle is not a synonym for subjectivism and willful appropriation, but for a sustained, dialogical learning process. Subjective impressions, Gadamer insists, are “no interpretation at all”; they are, rather, “a betrayal of exegesis as such.” The common source of exegetic failure resides in unwillingness (or lack of good will) to face up to the text’s appeal, including its possibly encoded message in the bottle; such unwillingness surfaces in the imposition of extrinsic frameworks or criteria and, more generally, in the obstinate clinging to private feelings: “This kind of understanding remains captive to subjectivism.” Preferable to this type of approach is recognition of the radical otherness of the text and the simple admission of non-understanding; in the case of Celan’s poetry, the latter admission may actually very often be a sign of “interpretive honesty.” Yet, for Gadamer, non-understanding cannot in turn be elevated into a general goal or maxim—which, in practice, would constitute a recipe for a relaxation of interpretive effort. Textual recalcitrance cannot dispense with the rigors of the “hermeneutical circle,” the constant alternation between inquiry and textual response. To be sure, hermeneutical endeavor does not yield an “objective” meaning or the invariant “truth” of a poem; both the diversity of readers’ expectations and the multivocity of the text itself militate against such a final completion of understanding. Yet, diversity of access and semantic levels also does not add up to a simple triumph of relativism, which could readily be a motto of subjective self-indulgence. As the Epilogue notes, carefully blending textual demands with exegetic latitude:

It is not contradictory to accept in one case different possible interpretations which all resonate with the sense of the poetic text, and in other instances to consider one kind of interpretation more precise and hence more “correct.” Different things are involved here (and need to be considered): on the one hand, the process of approximation toward “correctness” which is the aim of every interpretation; and on the other, the convergence and equivalence of levels of understanding which all may be “correct” in their way.⁹

The move toward (what I have called) an agonal or agonistic dia-

8. Gadamer, *Wer bin Ich*, 118-21.

9. Ibid., 129-31. As Gadamer adds, “There cannot be a ‘final’ interpretation. Every interpretation only aims at approximation; and its own concrete possibility would be vitiated if interpretation did not assume its historical place and did not insert itself into the ‘historical effectiveness’ [*Wirkungsgeschehen*] of the text.” Ibid., 133-34.

logue—a mode of exegesis honoring both the otherness of the text and the endeavor of understanding—was intensified in Gadamer's later work, especially in some writings resulting from the "Gadamer-Derrida encounter" of 1981. In an open "Letter" published a few years after that encounter, Gadamer defended himself vigorously against charges of a certain idealist or metaphysical penchant which had been leveled against him by Derrida and others. "I too affirm," he asserted at the time, "that understanding is always understanding-differently [*Andersverstehen*]." What is stirred up or brought to the fore when a word reaches another person or a text its reader, can never be stabilized "in a rigid identity" or consensual harmony. Rather, encountering a word or a text means always a certain stepping outside oneself—though without relinquishing one's questions and anticipations. Thus, understanding does not simply amount to consensual convergence or an effort "to repeat something after the other," but rather implies a willingness to enter the border zone or interstices between self and other, hence placing oneself before the open "court" of dialogue and mutual questioning. It was in this light that one also had to assess the meaning of terms like "self-consciousness" and "self-understanding"—expressions which had been used extensively in *Truth and Method* and which had become a target of criticism (because of their presumed preoccupation with subjectivity). According to Gadamer's Letter, the terms were not meant to refer to any kind of narrow self-centeredness, but rather to a Socratic process of self-reflection and self-questioning—a reflection which is bound to undermine precisely the assumption of a stable identity or rigid self-certainty. Resuming the central motif of his earlier Celan interpretation, Gadamer profiled more sharply the trajectory of his own work. Hermeneutics, he noted (agreeing at least partly with Derrida), involves a decentering—though not an erasure—of selfhood and semantic meaning: "For who we are is something unfulfillable, an ever new undertaking and an ever new defeat."¹⁰

This line of argument was still further expanded in an essay written a few years later, "Hermeneutics and Logocentrism." Here again Gadamer countered accusations charging his work with harboring a crypto-idealism and, more specifically, a "logocentrism" hostile to the recognition of difference and bent on incorporating and submerging otherness into the vortex of selfhood. As advanced by Derrida and other recent French thinkers, the accusation had a certain intuitive appeal—its rupturing of self-enclosure—but was ultimately misguided. For, in postulating a radical otherness or alterity, "deconstruction" of hermeneutics

10. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Letter to Dallmayr," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 96-97. The Letter was a response to an essay in which I had tried to compare and counterbalance Gadamer and Derrida; see my "Hermeneutics and Deconstruction: Gadamer and Derrida in Dialogue," also in *Dialogue and Deconstruction*, ed. Michelfelder and Palmer, 76-92.

frustrated precisely the concrete encounter or engagement of self and other. In Gadamer's words:

Now Derrida would object by saying that understanding always turns into appropriation and so involves a denial of otherness. Levinas, too, values this argument highly; so it is definitely an observation that one cannot dismiss lightly. Yet, it seems to me that to assume that such identification occurs within understanding is to impute a position which is indeed idealistic and "logocentric"—but one which we had already left behind after World War I in our revisions and criticisms of idealism. . . . Theologians like Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, the Jewish critique of idealism by Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber, as well as Catholic writers like Theodor Haeckel and Ferdinand Ebner served to shape the climate in which our thinking moved at the time.

Notions like the "fusion of horizons" discussed in *Truth and Method*, he added, should not be taken in the sense of a complete merger or a Hegelian synthesis, but in that of an engaged dialogical encounter: "I am not referring to an abiding or identifiable 'oneness,' but just to what happens in conversation as it proceeds." Dialogical encounter was perhaps less indebted to Hegelian dialectic than to the Socratic method of self-inquiry through interrogation and mutual contestation. According to the essay, it is in Socrates that we find an idea or a clue "from which one must start and from which I too have started out as I sought to reach an understanding of and with Derrida." This clue is that "one must seek to understand the other" even at the risk of self-critique and self-decentering—which entails that "one has to believe that one could be in the wrong." Regarding the accent on "*différance*," Derridean deconstruction contained a valuable insight—but one which was entirely germane to hermeneutics properly understood: "Difference exists within identity; otherwise, identity would not be identity. Thought contains deferral and distance; otherwise, thought would not be thought."¹¹

II

Viewed as an agonal engagement, Gadamerian hermeneutics is relevant not only to textual exegesis in the narrow sense, but radiates deeply into the broad arena of social and political concerns. Just as his early essays on a dialogical republic were addressed to the political scene of the Weimar (and later fascist) era, so his later writings on hermeneutical understanding are pertinent to our emerging "global city," that is, to an incipient world order marked by a contestation among cultures and a

11. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Logocentrism," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction*, ed. Michelfelder and Palmer, 119, 125 (in the above citations I have slightly altered the translation for purposes of clarity). Also compare Hans-Georg Gadamer, "*Destruktion* and Deconstruction," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction*, ed. Michelfelder and Palmer, 102-13.

growing resistance to one-sided Western hegemony. As it happens, Gadamer has not been an idly detached spectator of the agonies and transformations of our present age; repeatedly, as befits a “humanist” raised in the classical mold, he has voiced his philosophically seasoned views on the dilemmas and future prospects of humankind in the evolving global setting. For present purposes, I take as a road marker a study published barely a decade after the encounter with Derrida, *The Legacy of Europe*. In this study, Gadamer revealed himself to be a concerned and conscientious citizen of Europe—but of a properly chastised and “decentered” Europe. While pinpointing and commemorating the distinctive accomplishments of Europe, the study at no point endorses a supremacist outlook—and certainly not the stance of “Eurocentrism” which has been the target of much worldwide criticism and resentment. Instead of accentuating Western advances in science and technology, the study underscores the internal heterogeneity and diversity of traditions which constitute or shape European culture. It is this intrinsic multiplicity, this unity in and through difference, which for Gadamer marks the genuine “legacy of Europe,” a legacy which may serve as an exemplar also to non-Western societies and to an impending ecumenical world-culture.

Gadamer’s decentered perspective is clearly evident in the opening essay of the study, “The Multiplicity of Europe: Legacy and Prospect.” In the first lines of the essay, he presents himself not as a neutral onlooker but as a reflectively engaged participant in the unfolding events of our century: “I have lived through this tumultuous epoch from my childhood on, and hence I may count as a witness”—not as someone claiming a specialist’s expertise but as a philosopher seeking to come to terms with real-life experiences. One of the central experiences of our century for Gadamer is the dislocation of Europe from center stage and her insertion into a global network of interactions. In his words:

The epoch of the two World Wars has magnified and projected everything into global dimensions. In politics, the issue is no longer the balance of powers in Europe, that old cornerstone of diplomacy which was intelligible to everyone. Rather, what is at stake today is a global balance or equilibrium, that is, the question of the possible co-existence of immense power constellations.

This profound transformation affects the status and role of Europe in the world today, assigning to her a much-reduced position in comparison with the past. As Europeans, Gadamer adds, “we are no longer *chez nous* [amongst ourselves] on our small, divided, rich and diversified continent”; rather, we are intimately inserted and implicated in “world events.” Being embroiled in world events, Europe is also haunted and overshadowed by the global threats or dangers facing humanity today, especially the threats of nuclear catastrophe and ecological disaster. For

Gadamer, this is the current socio-political reality from which thinking has to start: "Europe is intimately enmeshed in the contemporary world crisis—a crisis for which no one can offer a ready-made solution."¹²

What role can and should Europe assume in this precarious situation? Tackling this question requires some reflection on the meaning and distinctive significance of Europe as it is manifest in the long trajectory of her history. Following in the footsteps of Husserl and Heidegger, Gadamer locates the distinctive trademark of Europe in the penchant for philosophy—a philosophy which from the beginning is drawn less to meditation than to inquiry and thus bears some intrinsic affinity with science in the broad sense. In our European culture, Gadamer notes, philosophy "from its inception has been linked with scientific investigation"; this, in fact, is "the novelty or novel feature which profiles and binds Europe together." Over the course of many centuries, the scientific aspect of philosophizing came to extricate itself from the broader fabric of European culture—a process which then served as the springboard for the ascendancy of Western science and technology to global hegemony. Yet, for Gadamer, this is only part of the story. While friendly to scientific inquiry, philosophy in the West was traditionally also connected with metaphysics, art, literature, the humanities, and theology. In the pre-modern era, these features formed part of the prevailing cultural framework—a framework whose ingredients were not fused in a bland synthesis but stood side by side in often conflictual relationships. To cite Gadamer again: in Europe, culture and philosophy took shape in a manner which "gave rise to the sharpest tensions and antagonisms between the diverse dimensions of intellectual activity." Still, given the original conception of philosophical inquiry, the decisive issue in European culture—an issue eventually marking Europe's position in the world—was bound to be the relation between philosophy and science or between science and the other ingredients of the cultural fabric.¹³

The ascendancy of empirical science in both the European and the global context was a product of the modern epoch, particularly of the dismissal of classical and medieval teleology in favor of the cognitive and technical mastery of nature. Instead of being a participant in a broader cultural discourse, science emerged as the dominant idiom due to the scientist's ability to distance the entire surrounding world into a pliant target of analysis and thus to act as a general overseer (or overlord). The modern epoch, Gadamer comments, heralds a historical period in which

12. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Die Vielfalt Europas: Erbe und Zukunft," in *Das Erbe Europas: Beiträge* (Frankfurt-Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), 7, 10-11 (translations into English are my own).

13. *Ibid.*, 13-14. Regarding Husserl, compare especially his "Vienna Lecture" of 1935, in Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 269-99. Also compare Martin Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie: Vom Ereignis*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, vol. 65 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt-Main: Klostermann, 1989).

human reason is able “to transform nature into artificial objects and to reshape the entire world into one giant workshop of industrial production.” The reaction of traditional philosophy to this upsurge of science was initially purely defensive; practitioners often retreated into a simple “underlaborer” position, a stance limiting reflection to the refinement of conceptual tools and epistemic techniques needed for scientific inquiry. This retreat was particularly widespread in the nineteenth century, during the heyday of positivism. In the meantime, however, the situation has dramatically changed. In view of the crisis potential of our age—a potential triggered in part by the triumph of technology—the issue is no longer simply to assist science, but to reflect anew on the relation of science to other dimensions of culture, both in Europe and in the global arena. According to Gadamer, a major credit for the changed outlook in the European setting goes to phenomenology and hermeneutics as inaugurated by Husserl and Heidegger. Particularly crucial in this context is Husserl’s notion of the “life-world,” a notion which thematizes the broad backdrop of lived cultural experience from which science itself arises and without which its vocabulary would be unintelligible. The writings of Heidegger and his successors further concretized the notion by linking it with human “praxis” and the basic “worldliness” of human existence. What comes into view from this vantage is the intrinsic situatedness of human life—signaled by such features as “temporality, finitude, projection, remembrance, forgetfulness and being forgotten.”¹⁴

Worldly situatedness challenges the prerogative of distantiation, or at least the presumption of the spectator or overseer to possess a privileged or the only correct slant on reality. Pursuing the insights of phenomenology and hermeneutics, contemporary philosophy is attentive to the contextuality of human experience, its embeddedness both in historically grown culture and in the natural environment, no longer seen merely as extended matter. As Gadamer states forcefully: “Nature can no longer be viewed as a simple object of exploitation; rather, in all its manifestations it must be experienced as our partner, that is, as the ‘other’ sharing our habitat.” Seen as our partner, nature is intimately entwined with us; far from denoting a radical externality, nature is “our” otherness or the “other of ourselves” [*das Andere unserer selbst*]. And, in fact, Gadamer asks, is there a genuine otherness which would not be the other of ourselves? This consideration is particularly important in the domain of human coexistence, that is, of intersubjective and cross-cultural “co-

14. Gadamer, *Das Erbe Europas*, 15-17, 20-24. Regarding Husserl’s notion of the life-world, see Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences*. For a discussion of successive transformations of “life-world” and “world” from Husserl and Heidegger to Derrida, see my “Life-World: Variations on a Theme,” in *Life-World and Politics: Between Modernity and Postmodernity, Essays in Honor of Fred Dallmayr*, ed. Stephen K. White (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 25-65. Regarding the “underlaborer” view of philosophy, see Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), 3-7.

being" in a shared world, where the issue is neither to distance the other into the indifference of externality nor to absorb or appropriate otherness in an imperialist gesture. On the cross-cultural level, this aspect of self-other entwinement has been one of the profound historical experiences of the European continent—which brings into view the peculiar cultural pertinence of Europe or of the "legacy of Europe" in our time, above and beyond the ongoing Westernization of the globe under the auspices of European science. For Gadamer, it is chiefly the multiplicity (or multiculturalism) of Europe which harbors the continent's legacy and promise for the world. He writes:

To live with the other, as the other of the other—this basic human task applies to the micro- as well as to the macro-level. Just as each of us learns to live with the other in the process of individual maturation, a similar learning experience holds for larger human communities, for nations and states. And here it may be one of the special advantages of Europe that—more than elsewhere—her inhabitants have been able or were compelled to learn how to live with others, even if the others are very different.¹⁵

The multiplicity of Europe, in Gadamer's view, is evident in the diversity of national (and sub-national) historical trajectories, in the heterogeneity of literary and religious traditions, and, above all, in the rich profusion of vernacular languages. In the face of ongoing efforts aimed at European unification, this multiplicity for Gadamer cannot and should not be expunged. From a global cultural perspective, the unification of Europe—especially in terms of a geopolitical power constellation—is of relatively minor significance. Unification would be a particularly dubious goal if it entailed the standardization of culture and language at the expense of historical vernacular idioms. According to the essay, the deeper significance of Europe resides in her multicultural and multilingual character, in the historical "cohabitation with otherness in a narrow space." Experienced as a constant struggle and challenge among European peoples, this cohabitation implies a lesson for humanity at large, for an evolving ecumenical world culture. The emphasis on indigenous traditions and vernacular idioms may seem to run counter to the prospect of a self-other entwinement or a genuine co-being with otherness. Indeed, concern with cultural distinctness may harbor the danger of a retreat into parochialism or ethnocentrism; but this retreat is not compelling. As Gadamer points out, the role of local traditions is a feature endemic to hermeneutics or to the "hermeneutical circle," with its emphasis on "prejudices" or prejudgments seen as the corrigible but indispensable starting points of understanding. In exegesis, just as in any other form of disciplined inquiry, there must be room for critical alert-

15. Gadamer, *Das Erbe Europas*, 28-30.

ness to prevent the sedimentation of preconceived ideas. Yet, Gadamer concludes,

where the goal is not mastery or control, we are liable to experience the otherness of the other precisely against the backdrop of our own prejudgments. The highest and most elevated aim that we can strive for is to partake in the other, to share the other's alterity. Thus, it may not be too bold to draw as the final political consequence of these deliberations the lesson that the future survival of humankind may depend on our readiness not only to utilize our resources of power and (technical) efficiency but to pause in front of the other's otherness—the otherness of nature as well as that of the historically grown cultures of peoples and states; in this way we may learn to experience otherness and human others as the “other of ourselves” in order to partake in one another.¹⁶

In *The Legacy of Europe*, the discussion of Europe's global significance is continued and fleshed out further in an essay titled “The Future of European *Geisteswissenschaften*.” The essay takes its departure again from the traditional distinctive mark of Europe: the attachment to philosophy and scientific inquiry. According to Gadamer, this attachment to inquiry has given shape to the European continent throughout the course of its historical development; particularly in the modern era, scientific reason has been a determining force in European civilization and, therefrom, in the rest of the world. Yet, as Gadamer again emphasizes, Europe's cultural or intellectual outlook has not been uniformly scientific, but rather diffracted from the beginning into a variety of facets, including (next to science) metaphysics, art, literature, and religion. This diffraction was intensified in modernity by the rise of empirical natural science and the radical Cartesian bifurcation of mind and extended matter. What emerged as a result of this bifurcation was a new and dramatic tension within the framework of European culture: namely, the division between the natural sciences and the cultural or “mental” sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*], that is, the humanities. In opposition to the “eternal verities” of traditional metaphysics as well as the universal propositions of modern science, the humanities place the accent on historically grown traditions, the rich nuances of vernacular idioms, and the concrete fabric of the human life-world. Under the influence of nineteenth-century historicism and twentieth-century phenomenology and existentialism, humanistic inquiry is increasingly attentive to such philosophically charged issues as temporality, historicity, and the finitude of human life. To this extent, although challenging traditional metaphysics, the humanities are heir to Europe's deeper metaphysical concerns. In Gadamer's words, it is “precisely the humanities” which have “taken over (more or

16. Ibid., 31-34.

less consciously) the great legacy of ultimate questioning” and which thereby have given to philosophy a new “historical orientation.”¹⁷

In focusing on historical diversity and contingency, the humanities bring into view an aspect of Europe’s legacy which is often ignored in the face of the steady Westernization of the world, a process seemingly bent on the relentless homogenization of the globe. In opposition to this leveling process, the humanities accentuate the multiplicity of Europe, the fact that Europe is a “multilingual fabric” consisting of the most diverse national and cultural traditions. This historical multiplicity has relevance beyond the borders of Europe for global development and the emerging world culture. “What we are witnessing,” Gadamer writes,

is in truth a global process which has been unleashed by the end of colonialism and the emancipation of the former members of the British Empire [and other empires]. The task encountered is everywhere the same: to forge and solidify indigenous identities in the search for national [and sub-national] autonomy. . . . This leads us back to our central theme. What is at stake is the future of Europe and the significance of the humanities for the future role of Europe in the world. The central issue is no longer Europe alone, but the cultural framework produced by the global economy and the world-wide network of communications—and thus the prospect of cultural multiplicity or diversity as emblem of the emerging civilization on our planet.

This issue throws a spotlight on the problem of human and social change and especially on the controverted question of social “development.” In contrast to an earlier, simplistic identification of the latter with Westernization, Gadamer notes, the meaning and direction of development or modernization have lost their “univocity” or unambiguous character in our time. This ambiguity does not basically affect the struggle against poverty and for decent standards of living in the so-called “developing” areas, a struggle which often can only be waged with a dose of Western-style science and technology. What remains unsettled is the degree to which scientific and technological advances can be balanced against the need to maintain the integrity and autonomy of indigenous traditions. As Gadamer observes, many countries today are engaged in the difficult search for a mode of culture capable of reconciling “their own traditions and the deeply rooted values of their life-world with European-style economic progress”; “large segments of humanity” now face this agonizing issue.¹⁸

In seeking to balance science and technology against indigenous or native traditions, developing countries implicitly or obliquely pay tribute

17. “Die Zukunft der europäischen Geisteswissenschaften,” in Gadamer, *Das Erbe Europas*, 37-39, 42-45.

18. *Ibid.*, 35, 46-48 (the words in brackets in the longer quotation are my insertion).

to the European legacy of the humanities; thus, anti-colonialism and opposition to "Eurocentrism" are not necessarily synonymous with the obsolescence or irrelevance of European thought. According to Gadamer's account, attention to local or national life-forms is everywhere in the ascendancy. What preoccupies leading intellectuals in the Third World, he notes, is no longer or not solely the absorption of the European Enlightenment and its offshoots, but rather the question of "how genuine human and social development is possible on the basis of indigenous traditions." This question, however, brings to the fore the teachings of Herder, one of the founders of the European humanities renowned for his concern with "folk spirit" and his collection of the "voices of peoples in song." Following in Herder's footsteps, humanistic inquiry since its inception has tended to concentrate on the diversity of historical traditions and life-forms, and especially on the role of "culture," seen as the development or unfolding of native endowments. In Gadamer's view, Herder's legacy in the humanities constitutes a bulwark against the relentless standardization of the world, that is, against its one-sided "Westernization" under the auspices of science, industry, and technology. The issue facing humankind today is whether development is going to come to a grinding halt in the utopia/dystopia of a rationalized "world bureaucracy" [*Weltverwaltung*], or whether history "will keep on moving" with its intrinsic tensions, conflicts, and diversified strands. The issue cannot be settled in advance; yet, present-day societies show powerful tendencies supporting the second alternative. Countering the pull of global standardization, our time witnesses a steadily intensifying trend "toward differentiation and the fresh articulation of hitherto hidden distinctions." Opposing the hegemonic claims of some superpowers and cutting across the fragility of traditional nation-states, "we find everywhere a striving for cultural autonomy—a striving peculiarly at odds with prevailing power constellations."¹⁹

This striving is evident within the confines of Europe—for example, in the conflict between the Flemish and Walloons in Belgium and in the secessionist struggles of the Basques in Spain and the Baltic states in the East. The deeper implications of this phenomenon, however, are global in scope and concern the character of the emerging world culture. At this juncture, Europe—no longer the center of the world—gains a new salience. This salience relates not to the unity or ongoing unification of the continent, but rather to the rich diversity of historical trajectories. Far from constituting a bland melting pot, Gadamer observes, Europe "exhibits in the smallest space the richest heterogeneity" and a "plurality of linguistic, political, religious, and ethnic traditions which have posed a

19. Ibid., 49, 52, 57-58. Regarding Herder, compare R. T. Clark, *Herder: His Life and Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955); and Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (New York: Viking Press, 1976).

challenge for many centuries and generations.” It is this very heterogeneity in Europe which provides a lesson for the world today, precisely as an antidote to the levelling thrust of technical and industrial uniformity. As Gadamer adds, cultivation of native traditions is by no means incompatible with cross-cultural tolerance—provided that “tolerance” is understood not as the outgrowth of neutral indifference but as the appreciation of otherness from the vantage of one’s own life-world (and its pre-judgments). It is a “widespread mistake,” he writes, to consider tolerance a virtue requiring the renunciation of indigenous life-forms and beliefs; yet, given that otherness implies selfhood as its correlate, tolerance can only proceed from a concrete dialogical (perhaps agonial) engagement between different perspectives and modes of lived experience. To this extent, the diversity of cultures—inside and outside of Europe’s borders—is not so much an obstacle as a precondition and enabling warrant for an ecumenical order. Herein, Gadamer concludes, resides the genuine significance of Europe—a properly decentered and chastised Europe—in our contemporary world:

This appears to me as the most evident mark and the deepest spiritual emblem of European self-consciousness: the ability, in the contest and exchange with different cultures, to preserve the distinctive uniqueness of lived traditions. To support this preserving effort is, in my view, the lasting contribution which the humanities can make not only to the future course of Europe, but to the future of humankind.²⁰

III

Gadamer’s comments on cultural diversity deserve close attention for their poignancy and judiciously weighted character. In a world rent by the competing pulls of Western-style universalism and bellicose modes of ethnocentrism, his accent on cross-cultural engagement opens a vista pointing beyond the dystopias of “melting pot” synthesis and radical fragmentation. In many ways, ecumenical dialogue in Gadamer’s sense bears resemblance to the notion of a “lateral universalism” articulated earlier by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (and restated more recently by Seyla Benhabib under the label of “interactive universalism”). As indicated before, dialogue in Gadamerian hermeneutics does not simply denote assimilation or a consensual “fusion of horizons”; given the ineradicable “otherness” of the other, dialogical relations are bound to be fraught with ambivalence and mis- or non-understanding—and often with agonial conflict. Recognition of such tension or agonistics resonates deeply with

20. Gadamer, *Das Erbe Europas*, 58-62. Regarding tolerance, see also Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, Jr., and Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965).

prominent strands in contemporary Western thought, especially strands indebted to “poststructuralist” and “postmodern” perspectives with their emphasis on discontinuity, rupture, and contestation. This resonance surfaces particularly in contemporary political theory, which is often marked by an intense concern with alterity and the dislocation of political identity. Thus, William Connolly, a leading American political thinker, speaks of the emergence of an “agonistic democracy,”

a practice that affirms the indispensability of identity for life, disturbs the dogmatization of identity, and folds care for the protean diversity of human life into the strife and interdependence of identity/difference. Agonistic democracy . . . does not exhaust social space; it leaves room for other modalities of attachment and detachment. But it does disrupt consensual ideals of political engagement and aspiration. It insists that one significant way to support human dignity is to cultivate agonistic respect between interlocking and contending constituencies.²¹

To be sure, agonistics needs to be approached cautiously since it may also give rise to mutual repulsion or exclusion and hence to a mode of non-engagement. Still, given prevailing political conditions, the role of agonal struggle cannot be discounted. On both the global and the domestic levels, contemporary social life bears the imprint of pronounced disparities or asymmetries, especially the asymmetry between hegemonic power structures and marginalized or “subaltern” groups and cultures. The notion of a dialogical “conversation of mankind” (to borrow Michael Oakeshott’s phrase) cannot provide a warrant for glossing over these contrasts. In the global arena, hegemonic disparity is the chief grievance fueling charges of “Eurocentrism,” as Gadamer himself keenly realizes. From the vantage of developing societies, Europe (or the West) is experienced not so much as an enticing welter of cultural diversity and multiplicity, but rather as a monolithic structure bent on standardizing the globe under the banner of Western science, technology, and industry. Although appealing, Gadamer’s vision of the multifaceted “legacy of Europe” thus has to be counterbalanced against another type of Western legacy, a heritage epitomized by such terms as imperialism, colonialism, and politico-economic spoilage. As it happens, this second type of legacy has tended to overshadow the relations between West and non-West in recent centuries, to the point of nearly obliterating Europe’s more benign and humanistic contributions. In an essay titled “The New Cultural

21. Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, x. Also compare Anne Norton, *Reflections on Political Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988); and Michael Brint, *Tragedy and Denial: The Politics of Difference in Western Political Thought* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991). Regarding “lateral” and “interactive” universalism, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 119-20; and Seyla Benhabib, *Situating The Self* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 3-6.

Politics of Difference,” Cornel West draws attention to the conflicting legacies of Europe, or what he calls the “Age of Europe.” “Between 1492 and 1945,” he writes,

European breakthroughs in oceanic transportation, agricultural production, state-consolidation, bureaucratization, industrialization, urbanization and imperial dominion shaped the makings of the modern world. Precious ideals like the dignity of persons (individuality) or the popular accountability of institutions (democracy) were unleashed around the world. Powerful critiques of illegitimate authorities . . . were fanned and fuelled by these precious ideals refined within the crucible of the Age of Europe. Yet the discrepancy between sterling rhetoric and lived reality, glowing principles and actual practices loomed large.²²

Western hegemonic predominance has become a frequent target of radical critiques in recent times—critiques which often sidestep the ambivalence of the European legacy in favor of a univocal or monolithic verdict. In his study titled *Eurocentrism*, Samir Amin portrays modern Western culture as a synonym for capitalistic exploitation and technological domination. While pre-modern Europe, in his view, still constituted part of a larger “tributary culture” attached to Africa and the Near East, post-Renaissance Western society emancipated itself from this religious-metaphysical background in order to gain worldwide politico-economic supremacy. “With the Renaissance,” Amin writes, “begins the two-fold radical transformation that shapes the modern world: the crystallization of capitalist society in Europe and the European conquest of the world.” Amin argues that by means of capitalism and modern science Europe was able to acquire an Archimedean standpoint from which it was possible to unhinge indigenous traditions and to pursue the project of global control. In this sense, the Renaissance period marked a “qualitative break” in the history of humankind since, from that time forward, Europeans became conscious of the idea “that the conquest of the world by their civilization is henceforth a possible objective.” With slight modification, a similar outlook is manifested in a number of recent studies and publications, studies whose very titles sometimes express already a political and intellectual indictment.²³ Although Western hegemony surely provides ample motivation for such an indictment, further reflection counsels against a summary verdict. One of the hazards involved in summary judgments is the lure of “essentialism”—the pitfall of construing modern Western culture exclusively under the rubric of economic

22. Cornel West, “The New Cultural Politics of Difference,” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Russell Ferguson et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 20-21.

23. Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism*, trans. Russell Moore (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989), 71-73. Also compare Francis Baker et al., eds., *Europe and Its Others*, 2 vols. (Colchester: University of Essex Press, 1985); and Helen Tiffin and Stephen Slemon, eds., *After Europe* (Sydney: Dangaroo, 1989).

control. A close corollary of this hazard is the detrimental effect on cross-cultural encounter. Viewed strictly from the vantage of Eurocentrism, modern Europe no longer is a partner in a cross-cultural dialogue, but an enemy to be defeated or destroyed.

As one might add, the attack on Western hegemony finds a parallel in the very domain which Gadamer singled out as an antidote to Eurocentrism: the domain of the humanities. Under the impact of both global and domestic challenges, the humanities in recent times have been the arena of intensive debates involving the status of "canonical" texts and their role in the educational curriculum. Proceeding under the banner of "multiculturalism," critics have denounced the traditional human studies for harboring an intrinsic elitism and for being insensitive to cultural, ethnic, and gender differences. Mirroring the hegemonic ambitions of Western culture in general, the humanities are said to exhibit hegemonic preferences in favor of "white male" standards; moreover, practitioners of the human disciplines are indicted for giving aid and comfort to political, economic, and technological modes of domination. Thus, invoking Michel Foucault's notion of "normalization," Paul Bové credits post-structuralist initiatives for highlighting the importance of "hegemonic elements of societal organization" and for focusing attention on "the determining roles played by the institutionalized practices and discourses of the human sciences in the constitution of relations of knowledge and power between individuals and institutions and among individuals." Though adopting a distinctly British angle, Stuart Hall similarly observes that the contemporary late-capitalist crisis "now cuts into and through the humanities from beginning to end," given that prevailing social technologies "have already invaded the humanities, summoning them to the barricades to defend an old project." In Stuart Hall's opinion, the basic issue today is whether the "new theoretical techniques" and the new vistas opened up by feminism and Black studies as well as by postmodernist and poststructuralist debates can be "won over and drawn into an understanding of the larger historical/political project that now confronts the humanities." As he adds somewhat somberly, the notion that the humanities still have the option "to decide whether or not to become social technologies is, in my view, hopelessly utopian."²⁴

As in the case of Eurocentrism, there is probably room to doubt a humanist "essentialism" or the narrow identification of human studies with a traditional cultural elite or a prevailing mode of technology. Precisely under the rubric of multiculturalism, efforts can (and should) be made to enhance the cross-cultural diversity of the humanities—in a manner aligning them more closely with Herder's and Gadamer's per-

24. Stuart Hall, "The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities," *October* 53 (Summer 1990): 22-23; Paul A. Bové, "Power and Freedom: Opposition and the Humanities," *October* 53 (Summer 1990): 79.

spective. Rather than pursuing this issue further, I want to return by way of conclusion to the theme of agonal dialogue or agonal engagement, an engagement which steers a course between fusional identity and exclusivist difference. Applying the theme to contemporary democracy, William Connolly defines a politics of "identity/difference" as a practice which strives to create "more room for difference by calling attention to the contingent, relational character of established identities," while simultaneously seeking to extend "agonistic respect into new corners of life"—a respect which, though embracing strife and contest, also recognizes that "one of the democratizing ingredients in strife is the cultivation of care for the ways opponents respond to mysteries of existence." Proceeding from a similar vantage, Iris Young in her book *Justice and the Politics of Difference* argues against both "melting pot" assimilation and radical segregation of cultural and ethnic groups. In her view, it is an "oppressive meaning of group difference" which defines the latter as "absolute otherness, mutual exclusion, categorical opposition." Such a categorical opposition of groups and cultures, she notes, "essentializes them, repressing the differences within groups"—with the result that difference as exclusion "actually denies difference." By contrast, a genuine "politics of difference" aims at an understanding of group diversity as "ambiguous, relational, shifting, without clear borders that keep people straight." Difference from this angle denotes not exclusivity but rather "specificity, variation, heterogeneity," escaping the twin pitfalls of "amorphous unity" and "non-overlapping otherness." In Young's words:

Group differences should be conceived as relational rather than defined by substantive categories and attributes. A relational understanding of difference relativizes the previously universal position of privileged groups, which allows only the oppressed to be marked as different. . . . Difference thus emerges not as a description of the attributes of a group, but as a function of the relations between groups and the interaction of groups with institutions.²⁵

To illustrate this relational meaning of difference (even against the backdrop of hegemonic power structures) I want to turn finally to a concrete instance of the correlation of Europe and the non-West, of colonizers and colonized: the example of European rule in India. In an essay titled "India and Europe: Some Reflections on Self and Other," Nirmal Verma, the noted Indian novelist and poet, has pondered the agonal relations and profound agonies marking the contacts between the two cul-

25. Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, 33; Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 169-71. The path beyond the "logic of complete identity" and that of "pure difference" is also charted in exemplary fashion in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, trans. Winston Moore and Paul Cammack (London: Verso, 1985), 105-11, 122-29.

tures. As Verma points out, the impact of Europe on Indian culture was more far-reaching and disturbing than that of earlier invasions or conquests; for Europe's influence affected not only overt social structures but the unconscious underpinnings of traditional ways of life. Far from being confined to "territorial space," he writes, Europe sought "to colonize India's *sense of time*, its present being merely a corruption of the past, its past, though glorious, believed to be dead and gone." In this scheme, Indian temporality could be rescued only if its past were "transformed into European present," that is, recast "in the ideal image of Europe."²⁶

This assault on the time frame also involved an attack on traditional identity, for "the idealized image of the European man subverted the Hindu image of his own 'self,' reducing it to a state of 'sub-self'" constantly aspiring toward fulfillment in the European model. As a result of these developments, Indian culture was internally split or torn asunder, looking like Janus "toward opposite directions at the same time: toward Europe for knowledge and material progress, and toward its own tradition for *moksha* and salvation." As it happened, a similar schism came to afflict European culture or the European psyche as it was exposed to the fissures of the colonized. Despite all her material advancement and prosperity, Verma observes, Europe during the last hundred years came increasingly to be "haunted by a 'wasteland' feeling of inner desolation," thus bearing witness to relational difference: "Was it a nemesis of fate that, through the circuitous path of history, India and Europe had arrived at a point where the face of the colonizer appeared as ravaged and forlorn as that of the colonized?" Regarding the future relations of these cultures, Verma appeals indeed to dialogue, but to a dialogue permeated by agonal respect, reticence, and even silence:

Two traditions, Indian and European, are seeking a sort of completion in one another, not through a philosophical discourse or mutual cross-questioning, but by creating a "common space" within which the voice of the one evokes a responsive echo in the other, feeling the deprivations of one's own through the longings of the other. . . . After all the utterances have been made by the anthropologists, historians and philosophers on either side, perhaps time has come for both India and Europe to pause a little, listening to one another in silence, which may be as "sound" a method of discourse as any other.²⁷

26. Nirmal Verma, "India and Europe: Some Reflections on Self and Other," *Kavita Asia* (1990): 121, 127.

27. *Ibid.*, 132, 137, 144.

